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Scholars and Sense

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SCHOLARS and SENSE

Meet four DePaul alumni whose elite scholarships have fueled their commitment to bettering the world

By Craig Keller

Photo by Gonzalo Reyes Rodriguez



"Research is like a family," says Pedro Serrano, who maintains ties with other DePaul-trained scientists and the McNair Scholars Program faculty mentor who inspired his career path.

From HIV prevention to community arts uplift, interfaith dialogue to violence reduction, the mission-based work of the following alumni was first seeded at DePaul by scholarship support and inspiring professors. Three of these individuals were first-generation college students. All faced challenging financial circumstances. Today, they are giving back to the public good and the professional and academic communities they serve.

PUBLIC HEALTH RESEARCHER

In a time of pandemic, public health researchers like **Pedro A. Serrano (CSH '09)** understand the urgent need to protect vulnerable populations.

Serrano supports HIV prevention efforts as a project director for the Cook County Health/Hektoen Institute of Medicine, a research, education and administrative organization based in Chicago. He works out of the Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center on the Near West Side of Chicago, one of the nation's largest HIV/AIDS clinics.

"I'm not going to be shy about it," says Serrano. "I have my job because of my time at DePaul with Dr. Harper and the McNair program. The program was a big deal for me when I was a college student."

The McNair Scholars Program, a U.S. Department of Education initiative, helps first-generation, low-income minority students acquire research experience needed to advance toward a PhD. Serrano received its support throughout his undergraduate years at DePaul, where he was enrolled in psychology and community service study programs.

McNair scholars are guided by a faculty mentor. Serrano chose Gary Harper, a psychology and public health professor formerly at DePaul who now teaches at the University of Michigan. Harper has dedicated his research to improving HIV treatment and prevention for young, underserved populations in the United States and as part of Daughters of Charity missions in Africa. At the time, Harper was doing HIV prevention work with a community health organization in Little Village, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side. Serrano, the son of Mexican immigrant parents, volunteered alongside Harper, simultaneously fulfilling a requirement of his community service coursework.

"It was very synergistic," says Serrano, who later co-authored with Harper a chapter in a textbook on sexuality.

Serrano, then also an AmeriCorps volunteer, weighed volunteering abroad versus a research job after graduation. Unsure, he turned to Harper, who facilitated an interview with **Sybil G. Hosek (CSH MA '98, PhD '01)**, another former student of his at DePaul, who is a principal investigator and psychologist involved in adolescent HIV prevention at Hektoen. Hosek hired Serrano as a research assistant.

"I've been working with her since then, going on 11 years," says Serrano. "We still work with Gary, as well as other public health researchers that teach or trained at DePaul. Research is like a family. You continue to work together wherever you go."

Serrano and Hosek work on epidemiological, behavioral and clinical trials with other infectious disease and psychology researchers. Among their proudest achievements was leading a team, as part of a global effort, in a clinical research trial to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of Truvada, an HIV antiviral drug used in pre-exposure prophylaxis prevention treatment. That effort also led to approval in 2017 of the drug's prescription to patients younger than 18.

More recently, Serrano has headed an online-focused project named Keeping it LITE. Funded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), it is part of a national research challenge by NIAID to find less expensive ways to continue its three-decade longitudinal study of people living with HIV. Every six months a 3,500-person nationwide group Serrano is following completes an online survey and receives a mailed HIV oral-swab home test kit. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Serrano devised another questionnaire for the cohort, a diverse collection of people ages 13 to 34, on how the crisis has affected their lives.

"We're doing what we can with our capacity," says Serrano. "We're limiting ourselves to questions that add to our knowledge about COVID and how this is affecting their emotional, physical and mental health."



Photo by Gonzalo Reyes Rodriguez

Pedro Serrano (center) and CORE Center researchers focus on HIV prevention and education.



Photo by Duke Virginia

Pascale Ife Williams at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with the P.O.W.E.R. Collective, which supports research, political and community action programs and professional development for and by communities of color.

HUMAN ECOLOGIST

Pascale Ife Williams (CSH '15) knows that culture and arts initiatives can lift up communities oppressed by institutional inequity. In the justice-driven projects she has organized and joined throughout her life, she's seen Black, queer and feminist communities reclaim power and identity through collective social movement. She also knows that power often lies dormant, waiting to be awakened.

"We have more solutions than we do problems," says Williams, a visiting faculty member at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) who is pursuing a PhD in human ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "That's a mind frame that guides my work. I see myself as a vessel who allows folks to uncover assets they already have access to in their communities."

When she was in her mid-20s and raising a young child, Williams transferred to DePaul from a community college to study community psychology. Earning a McNair scholarship fueled the first-generation college student's academic aspirations. The program funded summer research trips with McNair cohorts to England, where Williams examined culturally based art spaces and evaluation practices, and to Argentina, where she engaged with an arts collective that utilizes sociodrama, a social art form, to enact and process social, cultural and racial challenges being faced by communities.

"They use an interactive model of building community and working through conflict with large groups of people," says Williams.

Those experiences helped formalize methodology for Williams, building on earlier community arts endeavors.

As an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood, Williams created Art Forward, a program that encouraged residents to express the history and vision of their community through visual arts. As a member of Black Youth Project 100, a national organization addressing Black, feminist and queer issues, she co-founded the Healing and Safety Council (HSC), which promoted organizational culture rooted in joy, resistance and community accountability. HSC also supported the well-being of protesters through improvisational drama workshops and spiritual practice, including a Black activist healing manual, "Stay Woke, Stay Whole."

At SAIC, Williams teaches a class, "Creative Healing Practice and Blackness," that integrates justice arts related to the Black community. She also coordinates two programs, RE-TOOL 21 and Creative Lab for Cultural Leaders, with similar goals. RE-TOOL 21 seeks to increase the racial, economic and cultural diversity of arts and cultural workers by providing art preparation skills training to individuals underrepresented in the field. Creative Lab for Cultural Leaders offers leadership training to "culturally specific organizations whose purpose is to preserve, celebrate and uplift the culture they're representing," says Williams, "usually in the form of a museum space."

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Williams blends arts, spiritual practice and intersectionality in her community-building practice.

For her PhD dissertation, Williams is gathering oral histories from “movement workers”: artists/cultural organizers and healing practitioners. She’s also interested in movement work done by mothers, “whether biological or not, queer families or not.”

As a mother and visual artist herself with deep roots in community engagement, Williams may not linger long in higher education. She’s thinking of other creative ways to embody her practice, research and teaching with community-embedded themes.

“I’m probably just going to have to create my own organization,” she says.

SCHOLAR OF RELIGION

Exploring interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism is a global calling that has long spoken to **Peter Dziedzic (LAS ’13)**.

“I’ve always been interested in interreligious engagement, pluralism and what it means for people to be inspired by the world’s faith traditions to create both better selves and a better world,” he says.

Dziedzic, a former Fulbright scholar now pursuing a PhD in Religious Studies at Harvard University, aspires to a career as a writer, university professor, researcher and translator of Islamic and Buddhist texts.

He took his first steps on the path toward that goal as a high schooler, volunteering at the Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based international network that cultivates interfaith leadership on college campuses. Dziedzic was also an active Catholic in his home parish in Addison, Illinois. Islamic literature was an early influence, in particular the lyrical Persian poetry of Rumi and Hafez.

As an undergraduate in religious studies at DePaul, Dziedzic minored in Islamic studies and English. He was inspired by Thomas O’Brien and David Wellman, both professors in the Department of

Religious Studies. At DePaul’s Center for Interfaith Engagement (now the Center for Religion, Culture and Community), Dziedzic learned how religious cultures can help build diplomatic bridges to resolve conflict. He was particularly inspired to pursue the academic study of religion thanks to the guidance and encouragement of David Gitomer, an associate professor specializing in the religions and literatures of premodern South Asia. Dziedzic also lived at the Vincent and Louise House, a former Catholic Campus Ministry program that provided housing to a small, faith-based group of students in exchange for enacting DePaul’s Vincentian mission in the Lincoln Park community through service and hosting community meals. He studied with, and built community among, students in United Muslims Moving Ahead (UMMA), DePaul’s Muslim students association.

“DePaul’s community-oriented education trained me how to not only work with people who were different than me, but to flourish together,” recalls Dziedzic. “That was extremely foundational for me.”

Having enough credits to graduate early, Dziedzic spent the fall of his senior year studying Arabic in Amman, Jordan. Grants from the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, the Vincentian Endowment Fund and the Interfaith Youth Core sent him in the spring of 2013 to Dharamsala, India, where he studied Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan language while volunteering with the local Tibetan refugee communities. From India, Dziedzic’s path led to Rome, where he studied Christian-Jewish dialogue at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) on a Russell Berrie Fellowship in Interreligious Studies in 2013-14.

Political Science Professor Phillip Stalley, who advises DePaul students applying for scholarship programs, facilitated Dziedzic’s Fulbright research proposal in 2015. Dziedzic headed to Morocco, where he honed his Arabic, studied Sufi poetry and conducted field research on Sufi shrine pilgrimage practices. In 2016, he returned to Rome to earn a license from the Vatican’s Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies. His application to Harvard was successful, and there he completed his master’s in theological

Peter Dziedzic’s studies in Morocco (below), India, Kashmir and Italy look at how faith traditions inspire people to create better selves and communities.



**“IT’S EXPANDED MY SENSE
OF COMMON HUMANITY
AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP—
THAT WE ARE ALL IN THIS
TOGETHER.”**



Robert Vargas transforms homicide-pattern data into paintings as part of his team's efforts to share their findings with communities impacted by violence.

studies and is now studying Kashmiri literature “as a case study for how artistic reflection within religious communities can offer avenues for broader cultural diplomacy, interreligious reflection and the negotiation of various identities, boundaries and beliefs.”

Dziedzic is also a resident tutor and fellowship advisor to undergraduates at Harvard College. He finds it especially rewarding to connect students from difficult economic backgrounds with the sorts of study-abroad and research opportunities that helped him so much.

“I see the value of students stepping out of their comfort zone and experiencing a different culture,” says Dziedzic. “I would not be the person I am today if I didn’t experience the hospitality of Indians, Tibetans, Moroccans and Kashmiris, to name a few. It’s expanded my sense of common humanity and global citizenship—that we are all in this together, and we need to be there for each other. We all have similar values, concerns and needs.”

SOCIAL JUSTICE SOCIOLOGIST

Robert Vargas (LAS '07) is now a tenured sociology professor at the University of Chicago (U of C). He earned a PhD from Northwestern University, did two years of postdoctoral research at Harvard University and has a second book poised for publication. Once upon a time, however, he was a shy, insecure, first-generation undergraduate student in public policy studies at DePaul’s College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (LAS).

One day, William Sampson, a LAS public policy professor who has since retired, noticed how absorbed Vargas was in courses on social problems.

“After one class he said, ‘Just follow me,’ and dropped me off at DePaul’s McNair Scholars Program office,” recalls Vargas. “He told the director, ‘You need to convince this guy to pursue a PhD.’ I was like, ‘What’s that?’”

That visit changed his life. Vargas applied for the program, was accepted and learned how academia could be a viable career option. Through McNair, he earned a summer research internship

with a faculty member in the highly ranked sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley.

“That experience showed me how fun this profession could be and made me confident that I could hold my own,” says Vargas. “I would not be a professor without the McNair program.”

Vargas arrived at U of C following assistant professorships at Notre Dame University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research examines how laws, politics and bureaucracies shape the conditions of cities, with a particular focus on violence and health care.

His first book, “Wounded City: Violent Turf Wars in a Chicago Barrio,” published in 2016, argues that politically motivated gerrymandering and ward redistricting in Little Village, a low-income Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago, correlates in a block-by-block pattern with varying levels of gang violence and access to resources.

Vargas wants to see if the same pattern holds for homicide waves and infrastructure development in entire cities through a monumental project he runs as the director of U of C’s Violence, Law, and Politics Lab. Starting with Chicago, St. Louis and Milwaukee, Vargas’ research team is scanning maps of shifting urban geography from the cities’ beginnings to today and digitizing them with geographic information system (GIS) mapping software for statistical analysis. Vargas first learned GIS mapping in a certificate program at DePaul.

Vargas hopes the team’s findings can help governments anticipate and reduce violence and distribute humanitarian and economic assistance more equitably. A painter in his spare time, he and two student artists are also preparing to share the information with communities as a unique artistic presentation in libraries and other neighborhood spaces.

“Instead of disseminating this to the public through academic publications,” says Vargas, “why not render some of these maps, graphs and diagrams on canvas as paintings and bring the knowledge directly to communities through art exhibits at inclusive venues? I’d love to share this with as many people as possible.”